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SUBJECT: INTERIM TIP ASSESSMENT FOR BELARUS

Ref: State 146300

#### Summary

1. This interim assessment (reftel) covers Belarus' continuing efforts against trafficking in persons (TIP) since April, 2007. GOB action on TIP has seen marked, if uneven, improvement in this period. The GOB has provided increased in-kind resources to TIP-related NGOs, and has improved relations and increased cooperation with them. Though the government-run hotline still does not offer a large range of services to potential victims, authorities do cooperate with, and refer callers to, the more effective NGO hotlines. Some progress has been made in preventing coercion of victims to testify in investigations. There is no evidence of government collusion in trafficking. With the opening of the anti-TIP training section of the National Police Academy, the GOB has shown initiative in training officers to deal more effectively with TIP and to assist victims. End summary.

#### Increasing Resources Devoted to Victim Assistance

2. Although there has been little noticeable difference in direct government funding for victim assistance and protection in Belarus, the GOB has made several in-kind assistance efforts and has made administrative matters significantly easier for NGOs. The NGO Radislava reported receiving a newly-renovated building free of charge with free utilities from the authorities in return for an agreement to open a new shelter for victims of trafficking and domestic violence, and the Red Cross reported receiving favorable leasing terms and pricing for its facilities. Government sources stated that NGOs also receive waivers for customs duties. The Ministry of Interior has invested considerable resources in its newly-established anti-TIP section of the National Police Academy, financing 90 percent of its startup costs. The TIP Academy will train at least one TIP specialist for each of the 156 police districts throughout the country in law-enforcement, victim assistance and protection. Belarusian Embassy Consular Sections have repatriated several victims from the Gulf States and the Caucasus region. The Ministry of Interior has also contributed USD 40,000 for conferences sponsored by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and often also provides transportation, security, and lodging for participants. NGOs have reported close cooperation from authorities in distributing educational materials. Authorities supported distribution of public service announcements produced by the Red Cross and IOM, airing them on state television and on television screens at subway stops free of charge.

#### Continuing Effort to Improve Relations and Encourage NGOs

3. Several TIP-related NGOs have reported improved relations with authorities, and the government has begun to publicly acknowledge the work of local NGOs. IOM mentioned a marked improvement in relations with government entities during the past two years. While the authorities are still generally distrustful of NGOs, they have increased cooperation with TIP-specific NGOs and are showing a more open and cooperative attitude. In the past, when IOM or other international NGOs submitted proposals for new projects for mandatory registration, authorities often directed them to eliminate references to local NGO partners. However, this year they began to allow mention of partner NGOs in the paperwork, and the Ministry of Interior now even publicly acknowledges local NGO participation in high-profile projects. In April 2007, the Minister of Interior mentioned the participation of eight local NGOs in a policy speech, a significant step considering that as recently as November 2006 he avoided all references to such NGOs in public addresses.

#### Ensuring Victims Are Not Pressured to Assist Investigations

4. Several NGOs have reported an improvement in the area of victim coercion, though there are still reports that pressure to cooperate with investigations does occasionally occur with less experienced officers at the local level. Official policy forbids coercion of victims, and it appears that this is taken seriously by Ministry of Interior leadership, though the policy is still being assimilated by the ranks. The State Border Committee now allows IOM to take and shelter victims for several days before calling in investigators. The issue of pressuring victims is one area that the TIP Academy plans to emphasize during its training of local TIP-specialist police officers.

#### Investigating Public Officials

5. All of Post's sources on TIP, both GOB and non-governmental, have stated that there appears to be little if any complicity of

government officials at any level in trafficking. Though there have been reports of local border guards taking bribes to enable smuggling of goods into the country, there have been no reports of TIP-related bribery.

#### Limited Efficacy of Government Hotlines

16. The Ministry of Interior continues to run one hotline, though its single goal is to offer information regarding the licensing status and legitimacy of agencies involved in work and study abroad. Even the Ministry acknowledges that NGO-run hotlines are more effective at providing a broader range of services, and that they refer callers to them. La Strada and IOM have reported very strong cooperation between the government hotline and their own hotlines in Minsk and Brest. A La Strada official acknowledged that it would be ideal for callers to receive all necessary information in one call, but does admit that the government hotline refers all callers to them and that authorities do not hinder or interfere with their work.

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